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ABSTRACT

A discussion on the rights of children both within the legal structure of society and in the family are discussed. The position is taken that children have the right to be responsible for their own actions, the right to internalize control over their own behavior. It is also contended that under the conditions of freedom, choice, and contingent feedback from the environment, children develop the capacity to set goals for themselves and to take appropriate actions in pursuit of these goals. This is the essence of voluntary responsible behavior. It is pointed out that the roots of responsibility run all the way back to the beginning of life. Three theories of behavior exist: (1) the psychodynamist, i.e., man is driven by instinct, inborn and immutable; (2) Behavicrism, which views man as a passive processor of information; and (3) the view that man is an active, manipulating, conscious organism, who is, under the proper circumstances, capable of structuring the world, comprehending it, and of controlling his own actions and intentions. Responsibility is described as a pattern of behavior which starts early in life with the free exploration of the environment. It is finally pointed out that to insure the rights of children to develop and grow to the peak of their potential, it is necessary to understand and enhance the conditions which facilitate this growth. (CK)

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THE RIGHTS OF CHILDREN: RESPONSIBILITY AND FREEDOM

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"I come from a country which does not yet exist."

J. Craveirinha

The other participants in this symposium have looked at the rights of children both within the legal structure of society and in the family. I hope to discuss the same question from the standpoint of the child as a developing organism.

The position I shall take can be stated very simply. Children have one right, the right to be responsible for their own actions. The right to internalize control over their own behavior. This is an absolute right. Without responsibility, defined in this way, a society such as ours cannot function properly. Thus we are speaking of a pattern of behavior demanded by the structure of society and not simply a privilege to be enjoyed by those who can afford it. I shall contend that under the conditions of freedom, choice, and contingent feedback from the environment, human beings come to internalize control over their lives. Under these conditions children develop the capacity to set goals for themselves and to take appropriate actions in pursuit of these goals. This is the essence of voluntary responsible behavior.

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Yet for a variety of reasons, the conditions which facilitate the development of responsibility are systematically denied to many individuals within our population, and the development of responsibility is consequently frustrated.

The results of this denial are evident all around us. They can be seen in adults who feel no power or control over their lives, and in children given every advantage an affluent society can offer who still resort to vandalism,

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drugs, and a nihilistic life style in the face of real problems to be solved and real challenges to be met. The situation has become so widespread that only the most extreme cases make the news, like the twenty-two year old boy treated by a medical clinic in the Haight-Ashbury district of San Francisco who had injected himself 37,000 times in a four year period with every conceivable drug he could put into his needle.[1]

This is the price we pay when we deny the right to be responsible, and it is a price we can no longer afford.

How has this situation come about? I shall try to show how our perspective on the nature of the human organism has led us to undermine the very conditions that are critical to the development of responsible behavior in children. This perspective has led to social institutions which systematically deprive children of the opportunity to develop control over their own lives. I will describe an alternative perspective on the nature of man which is beginning to emerge in modern psychology. I shall try to show how this different perspective can lead to very different social institutions whose job it would be to enhance rather than deny a child his basic right to be responsible.

What is the view of man held by the major theories in psychology? During the first half of the 20th century, theoretical psychology has been dominated by two prevailing views of the nature of the human organism. While these two theoretical viewpoints are in many ways divergent, they agree on one essential point. They agree that man has little control over his own behavior, and that the study of such conditions as freedom, choice, and the development of volition, is of little importance to the science of psychology.

For the psychodynamic theorist, man is driven by instinct, inborn and immutable. Society can do little more than to impose certain controls, usually

through the workings of fear, to suppress and redirect this instinctual behavior.

The other theoretical perspective, that of Behaviorism--which started as a kind of puritan revolt against the methods of the introspectionist school--views man as a passive processor of information. Mental events are seen as intangible and unapproachable, and the basic datum of the science is the way in which the organism "reacts" to patterns of external stimulation and reward.

In neither of these theoretical paradigms is there a firm place for the actions of the will, and without a will the questions of freedom, choice, and the development of personal responsibility are of no consequence. These theories, with their narrow and inadequate views of man, have permeated our attitudes in social science, philosophy, education and childrearing. These attitudes have led to the development of social institutions that see their primary task as that of controlling and training children with little concern for the way in which the individual thinks about himself, or with his need to gain personal control over his own life.

When these institutions fail, which they are doing, the response has been to say that we need a stronger application of the theory, more efficient control over the subjects, more powerful rewards and punishments. The argument advanced most recently by B.F. Skinner, one of the major proponents of the modern behaviorist view, is that we need to do away with the last vestiges of freedom and choice in the name of greater efficiency in applying the theoretical model.

Yet it seems obvious, at least to me, that the more efficiently the model is applied, the more blatant and obvious will be its failure. The problem in this approach lies not with inefficiency but in the fact that the view of man it holds is inappropriate to describe the human creature. This view of man is flawed because it treats man's most unique and fascinating characteristics as

trivial and unimportant. In the words of one prominant philosopher, it treats: "genuine thought as a desease".[2] It seems freedom, choice and voluntary activity as an illusion, and views control as something vested in agencies external to the individual. It is hardly surprising that a child emerging from institutions based upon such a view of man, feels powerless.

There is, however, an alternative which is beginning to emerge within the discipline of psychology. It holds the view that man is an active, manipulating, conscious organism who is, under the proper circumstances, capable of structuring the world, comprehending it, and of controlling his own actions and intentions.

This emerging perspective is defined, in part, by such theorists as Jean Piaget, Jerome Bruner, Laurence Kohlberg, Kurt Lewin, and Leon Festinger. It is a fresh perspective offering a different approach to what should be studied and why, and it is directly relevant to the right of personal responsibility.

Let me describe the development of responsibility from this different perspective, and then describe its implications for social institutions which have, as their primary concern, the growth and development of children.

Responsibility is a pattern of behavior, not just a single act in a single situation. This pattern of behavior starts early in life with the free exploration of the environment. As a result of his active exploration of the world, the child starts to develop cognitive structures which facilitate further exploration by bringing habitual, internalized control over a wider and wider range of activities. All of the elements of later responsible behavior can be found in these infantile activities. Control develops rapidly under conditions which permit freedom of action and provide a range of stimulus conditions for the child to explore. If the feedback he receives from the world, both physical and social, is contingent upon his actions and realistic, the cognitive structures

he develops will be accurate representations of the world and responsible action is facilitated. Finally, although it sounds almost trivial in comparison to the weighty variables above, it is important to note that internalization of control does not occur unless the child is able to complete actions which are begun.

In short, the conditions which facilitate the development of internalized control are freedom, choice, contingent and responsible feedback, and completion. Now let me point to some of the ways in which the necessary conditions for the development of responsibility are thwarted by the environment in which many children live. At the same time, I will try to suggest some of the things we might do to reverse this trend.

I suggested that active exploration and manipulation of the world are necessary if children are to structure the world in which they live and if they are to gain control over themselves. But this active exploration can be and often is frustrated from very early in life. A child who is hungry will not explore his world; a child who is fearful or under stress, or weak from disease will not and cannot explore his world. If the basis of responsible behavior is the active manipulation of the environment, as I have suggested, then this drive can be and often is frustrated, weakened and perhaps permanently retarded by early deprivation of basic necessities. There is absolutely no excuse for this; it is deprivation of a basic right demanded by society. Moreover, the cost of meeting these needs in early childhood would surely be enormously cheaper than the cost of the variety of institutions needed to compensate for a lack of internalized control in adults.

The important point here is that the roots of responsibility run all the way back to the beginning of life. If we wait until the child enters school, or

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reaches what is often called the "age of reason", it may be too late. Children denied the basic necessities of growth in infancy are ill equipped to take advantage of opportunities later in childhood.

Between infancy and up to the early years of school, the most important way in which responsibility is thwarted is by a frustration of the third component of the model I described: that of contingent feedback. During this period of intense growth, the child gains control of his physical world, and begins the long process of structuring and coming to grips with the social world. Once again, the greater his exposure to the world under conditions of minimal motivational demands and a maximum of responsive, contingent feedback, the more he internalizes control and develops responsibility. The role of providing this responsive feedback is taken primarily by the adults in the child's immediate environment. But a myriad of social forces have conspired to make this task difficult if not almost impossible. The breakdown of communal ties and the weakening of the extended family, due at least in part to extreme geographical mobility, have lessened responsive contact between adults and children.

There are a variety of ways to attack this problem once the nature of it becomes clear. We could and should make parenthood less of a painful burden than it has become, but at the same time make clear that it is a difficult and demanding task not to be undertaken without careful thought and preparation. Most important, however, is to make clear the import of the view I have been discussing. Children learn by interacting with a <u>real</u> world containing <u>real</u> people who have <u>real</u> values, not by being "rewarded" for espousing values which the adults in their world like to think they believe but do not practice.

Our failure to facilitate the development of responsibility is nowhere more evident than in our school system, and yet it is here that the behaviorist view of learning and development is most consistently applied. Freedom of exploration

is denied almost entirely. Children are expected to perform for the artificial and meaningless reward of grades, within the context of a narrow choice of subject matter, more often than not presented in a dishonest and idealistic way. Almost nothing about this environment encourages responsible development and it should be no surprise that little is achieved. Since schools have been subjected to an increasing amount of criticism along these very lines, I will not spend more time describing what is wrong with them. The problems with our schools have been outlined in detail but the solutions to these problems have seemed beyond our grasp. This is so because we have been reaching in the wrong direction.

Schools will not improve until they see their task and the children with whom they work in an entirely different light. I have already suggested some of the elements of that different perspective in this paper. The job of applying this new perspective will make considerable demands upon everyone involved, however, and psychologists could aid that process by devoting their time to the study of the development of internalized control. As we learn more about this model and the theory from which it is derived, we will be able to apply it with greater precision than is possible at this point in time. To do so we will have to change the <u>focus</u> of our <u>attention</u> in research. We must know more about human behavior in situations where external controls are minimal and where the internal drive to explore and master predominates. We need to study the way in which the <u>human</u> organism structures his world, the effect of a variety of social influences upon this cognitive structure, and the way in which behavior is a consequence of this subjective conception of the world.

I have suggested that the one basic right possessed by children is a right to be responsible--to internalize control over their behavior. I have suggested

that the dominant theories of psychology are based upon a view of man as a creature shaped by events and forces beyond his immediate control. This perspective has resulted in social institutions which reduce rather than expand human potential. The study of psychology has been the study of how the environment controls man. I have tried to show how this approach is inadequate. Human behavior is not adequately characterized as determined primarily by deep-seated biological instincts nor as driven by external rewards and punishments. The proper question for psychology to answer is not how the environment controls man but how man comes to control himself and his environment. In fact, the political analyst I.F. Stone put the issue nicely when he said:

> "I think every man is his own Pygmalion, the spends his life fashioning himself. In fashioning himself, for good or ill, he fashions the human race and its future."

This is the essence of responsibility - the ability to fashion one's own life and future. This ability has roots in infancy and is nourished by conditions of freedom, choice, and responsive human contact. If we are to insure the rights of children to develop and grow to the peak of their potential, we must understand and enhance the conditions which facilitate this growth.

It is time for psychologists to abandon these views of human nature that rob man of his responsibility. It is time we took a fresh look at the creature we hope to understand, in the light of the full range of human potential and not just with a view to what we need to know to "control" his behavior. It is time, in short, to stop our fruitless search for primarily instinctual or primarily environmental "causes" of behavior. Man is capable, under the proper circumstances, of controlling his instincts and of controlling external environmental stimulation. It is the development of this control which we need to understand and encourage. Only when we take our fate in our own hands will the future come within our grasp.

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Footnotes

1. Zimbardo, P. The Human Choice: Individuation, reason and order vs. Deindividuation, impulse, and choas, In: Nebraska Symposium on Motivation, 1969, p. 241.

2. Gellner, E. Words and Things. London, 1959.

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